

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, D.C.**

February 25, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

I write to you regarding the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) recent announcement that the Farmers to Families Food Box Program (Food Box) was approved for a fifth round of food purchases. This announcement comes at a critical time for many families not only in the twelve rural counties that I represent, but across the United States who remain in need of immediate support. While I am encouraged by USDA's decision to continue the Food Box program into the first few months of 2021, I remain deeply concerned that the current distribution plan will leave too many of our rural communities underserved.

The fourth round of the Food Box program fully excluded many parts of upstate New York, including my twelve-county district, from receiving Food Boxes. USDA's distribution model awarded contracts to downstate distributors, leaving upstate families and producers out of the equation. In contrast, the county allocation model that USDA was following for previous Food Box distributions allowed our region to keep food sourced and distributed locally. Many of the farmers and processors in my district were able to witness the direct impact that their product was having on those in need within their own communities. And most importantly, families in our communities were receiving wholesome, fresh product on a regular basis.

Last December, an additional \$1.5 billion in funding was provided to USDA through the most recently passed COVID-19 relief package, equipping the agency with the necessary resources to continue the important Food Box program. Since that announcement, the USDA has awarded the contract for the New York distribution to a company out of New Jersey, which renews my concern that upstate New York producers will remain excluded from the distribution process altogether. Further, I question whether the Food Box program will reach the northernmost portion of New York that I represent and serve our families in need.

It is essential that upstate New York families be included in the distribution of the next round of Food Boxes. For this reason, I urge USDA to reconsider its allocation model and the process by which contracts are awarded to distributors. Upstate New York is home to a plentiful and diverse agriculture industry comprised of farmers who are more than eager to participate in this program and feed families within their own communities who still face significant food insecurity issues as the pandemic continues.

During your confirmation hearing before the Senate Agriculture Committee on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, Senator Lahey emphasized the challenges that the Farmers to Families Food Box program has presented for farmers and families in very remote areas. I was encouraged that you indicated USDA would seek to make improvements to the program to ensure it includes rural farmers and local families. I fully support such improvements to ensure that this program reaches the most rural parts of our country and address food insecurity issues in the most efficient way possible.

I appreciate your attention to this matter, and I look forward to working together to serve rural communities and our most vulnerable as we continue to address the challenges associated with the COVID-19 crisis.

Sincerely,



Elise M. Stefanik  
Member of Congress